TRSMA
THE ROHNA SURVIVORS MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION
www.rohnasurvivors.org
March 2021

Letter From the President

By: Jason Markiewitz
TRSMA President

First, it seems like a long time since we saw each other...and, that's true! Quite a few things have happened around the world since we last met and thanks to the inventive nature of our top-tier reunion planners, we will see one another again this June...virtually, of course. We took the 'bull by the horns' and worked a little magic so that everyone can stay apprised of what we're working on and what's on the way.

A virtual reunion is challenging, but we are working very hard to make it a worthwhile experience for everyone. It also gives us a unique opportunity to share our time and our organization with folks who may not have been able to travel; thus expanding our reach even more. And, as if a "virtual reunion" isn't space-age enough for you, it's a reminder of two things: we're still getting through life amidst COVID-19, and it's the 21st century.

I remember a few years ago we discussed the option of using Skype to broadcast during our banquet and how strange that seemed. Now, it almost seems strange not to! I look forward to seeing you all this year and wish everyone a very happy, safe, and healthy 2021.

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ZOOM-ing in 2021

By: Deborah Sanchez
TRSMA Vice President & Reunion Coordinator

It has been awhile since the last newsletter and the posting of our 2021 reunion plans. Much has happened in our world since then. We have as a nation and a world been firmly gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. Although vaccines have been created and are currently being administered, it will still be a long, slow emergence from our personal shelters and an even longer national recovery. Like you, the Board members and I are finding our way through this new "landscape". Especially regarding this year's reunion. Navigating with the thought of everyone's health and well-being front and center in our decision making.

Given this new criteria, we have decided that the 2021 reunion will not be held in Salt Lake City as we had originally planned, but rather, will be a virtual one! It will be held on the "Zoom" platform on Saturday, June 19th beginning at 8 am PDT. Currently we are in the development stage of this undertaking. Once everything has been scheduled, we will post all the information you will need in order to join us on the website. We will also be mailing out that information for those of you who do not possess a laptop, desktop or smartphone.Hopefully this is enough advance notification for those without any type of "Zoom" capable device to make arrangements to borrow a laptop or smartphone from a relative, friend or neighbor to use for this occasion. You might even ask them to join you as your "Zoom" assistant!

We genuinely hope all of you can be part of this gathering as we all say a virtual "hello" and gather together virtually to honor the men of the Rohna.

Ruth and Gus

The year of 2020 was a unique, sometimes difficult year. It challenged us all in many ways. One of these challenges was, and continues to be, the loss of loved ones. Most families were not able to be with loved ones in their final hours and many were unable to hold some sort of service to say goodbye.

Thankfully that was not the case for two of our most admired and loved: Ruth Canney and Gus Gikas.

Ruth, one of the originators of the Rohna reunions and a Board member, passed away on June 16, 2020 of natural causes. She is the only member of our organization to ever be honored on our website. It seemed appropriate to pay tribute to the "mom" of the Rohna reunions in this manner. Please read more of all she did for this organization at: www.rohnasurvivors .org.

We also lost Gus this past year. Gus Gikas was one of the founders of The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association, a Board member and a survivor. He was also the longest, consecutive Rohna reunions, survivor attendee. Gus passed away of natural causes on September 22, 2020.

Although our hearts are saddened by the loss of these two, our lives are much richer for having known them.

Gus Gikas

Throughout the years it has been tradition to pay tribute to survivors who were key members of the Association upon their passing, in the newsletter. Therefore, this newsletter is dedicated to Gus Gikas.

Gus was not only a key member, he was a founding member of this organization. Follow the paper trail and you will find his name on all the original organizational documents along with all the other survivors, NOKs and USS Pioneer crew that created what is known today as The Rohna Survivors Memorial Association.

Though the reunions began in 1993, the Association itself was not formalized until 1999. Not only was Gus on the first Rohna Board, he was also the last original Board member. His voice of reason and perspective were always helpful, but it was his willingness to hear the other side and to even re-evaluate his position that made him an invaluable member of the Board of Directors.

His insight, input and guidance was immeasurable throughout these many years and they will be sorely missed.

Continuing the connection…

Ruth was the direct connection to the Association for so many of our survivors, their widows and families and for NOK's. I know that she and some of them corresponded a few times a year. She sent out her 'reunion wrap-up' letters to many and for some, Christmas cards were also exchanged. She also received updates regarding many of our survivors, their spouses and NOK's; particularly of their passing.

Now that Ruth is no longer with us, I would like to reach out to all of you to keep this path open. We still want to know. It is important to this Association that we recognize when a survivor, their widow or a NOK is deceased. Even if we are notified long after the event, we want to know. It is important for us to recognize them in the newsletter.

The newsletter is the original vehicle used by the organization to keep members informed and it is the only place where we post the information of a survivor's, a spouse or NOK's passing. If you have information regarding a survivor or other member's passing, please contact me with their name and date of passing using one of the following:

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IN MEMORIAM
A TRIBUTE TO GUS GIKAS (1921 – 2020)

By: Mary Mack (Daughter of Michael Walsh) with Deborah Sanchez

Many different Rohna survivors attended the annual reunion over the years, but you could always count on seeing one devoted survivor every single time — Gus Gikas. Gus traveled to the very first Rohna reunion in 1993 and was present for each gathering thereafter, until 2018. Although unable to attend the most recent gathering in 2019, he briefly joined the group via FaceTime. Gus holds the distinction of attending more reunions than any other survivor, as well as being the last survivor to attend a reunion. To say that he will be missed at future reunions and events is a total understatement.

Gus was a founding member of the Rohna Survivors Memorial Association and remained on the Board of Directors until his passing on September 22, 2020 at the age of 99. He was the last board member from The Greatest Generation.

Though he felt blessed to survive, the events of November 26, 1943 never left his mind. His memory was so incredibly sharp and he clearly recalled so many details of that awful day. Gus was dedicated to telling his story, and worked tirelessly to bring attention to the sinking of the HMT Rohna. We look forward to seeing his face and hearing his voice again in the upcoming documentary, "Rohna: Classified."

Gus was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He was a devoted family man of the highest character with a generous spirit — he was loved and admired by absolutely everyone. Gus and his wife, Lillian Leola Shafer Gikas, were married for 67 years before she passed away. He was her sole caregiver for the 10 years she lived with Alzheimer's Disease; making sure she always accompanied him to the Rohna reunions. They raised two boys together, Donne Wayne, who preceded him in death, and Kenneth, who accompanied his father to the reunions in his later years.

Gus was an amazing man who never held on to resentment. At the 2005 Rohna reunion, the son of Hans Dochtermann — the commanding German pilot who launched the missile in the Rohna attack — came to apologize for his father's actions. Gus was one of the survivors who shook his hand and accepted his apology, but his quote about it in a local newspaper shows the kind of person he was and what we will miss so much about him:

"I want to let him know there are no hard feelings," said Gus. "It is time to move on. You don't hold a grudge that long. There is nothing to be gained. Life is too short."

Life may be too short, but Gus's was truly a life well lived. His dedication to telling the true story behind the Rohna attack inspires us all to continue his mission. Gus will be missed, but never forgotten.

Left: Gus and wife, Lillian Leola
Right: Gus and son, Ken
Center: Gus and Family - 2018

Does Anyone Know?

If you have information regarding any of the items below or any of the items in the guestbook on our website: rohnasurvivors.org, please contact Janice Pumelia at: jetpumelia@gmail.com or by mail at: Janice Pumelia, 56 Garland Court, Brooklyn, NY 11229

My grandfather, Peter Xanthus, was part of the 31st Signal Heavy Construction Battalion who survived the Rohna but has since passed. (2008) I never really spoke with him of his experience and I regret that now, but I wanted to reach out to see if anyone has any stories about him. Were you with him in the water or on the ship when it got hit? Or maybe a family member of yours has spoken of him? Any info would be greatly appreciated.

~ Alison Xanthu

My grandfather was on the HMT Rohna and was a survivor. His name was Walter D. Zielinski. He died when I was 12 years old so I never had the chance to speak with him about what he experienced during WWII. Are there additional details I can find somewhere about what happened to him? How was he rescued? Thanks for your time.

~ Jared Roth

I'm looking to obtain information about Howard M. Blackman, my great uncle. According to the Mobile, Alabama newspaper dated January 23, 1944, the War Dept at Washington officially announced Saturday (1944) that 19 year old Pvt. Howard M. Blackman, son of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Blackman of Baltimore St. was missing in action in the Mediterranean area. According to the family and a couple of old newspaper clippings, Howard was a casualty of the HMT Rohna. Please provide any info you may have regarding his death.

~ Dawn Teller

My uncle Sgt. William S. Dell was a casualty. If any one knows him personally could you please email me? We didn't realize that this website exists until today. My mother is Uncle Bill's sister. Thank you for any sharing of his life back then.

~ Wendy Cain

These requests and so many more are on our website: www.rohnasurvivors.org/guestbook. Please take the time to look at them and if you have information, please send it to Janice Pumelia so she can provide answers to them.

Research Archives

Here are some helpful websites if you want to conduct your own research. Listing here is **not** an endorsement of any of these sites, simply a primer to help you start your internet research. Most of them don't cost a thing!

National Archives Veterans Records
www.archives.gov/veterans

Honor List of Dead & Missing Army & USAAF Personnel http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/army-casualties/

Army Air Forces Historical Association
www.aafha.org

Air Force Historical Research Agency
www.afhra.org

US Army Air Forces Personnel Records (Casualties)
Records of USAAF lives lost in WWII
www.usaafdata.com

USAAF General Information
www.usaaf.com

CBI Roundup (Newsletters from WWII)
http://www.ex-cbi-roundup.com

We have added to our Website Lists!

We are happy to announce that with more people contacting us inquiring about loved ones, we have been able to identify and add the following names to our website.

Survivors - Joseph L. Martin
Casualties -
USS Pioneer - Raymond A. McCarville; Philip Cool

More Pieces of the Puzzle

By: Janice Pumelia

A little over a year ago I agreed to work with Jack Ballo at Rohna Classified to create lesson plans on the Rohna suitable for students in grades 7-12 as part of their WWII curriculum. Right before posting these lesson plans to the Rohna Classified website and the TRSMA website, Jack asked that I look over a paper written on the Rohna approximately 10 years ago by a student at Cornell University named Caitlin McHugh. Her paper became part of the Cornell Library's digital archives repository, which provides long term access to a broad range of Cornell-related digital content of enduring value. Her paper, "Unraveling the Secret Behind the HMT Rohna", particularly focused on the classified aspects of the tragedy and how it impacted so many families who lost loved ones. This engaging paper would offer much food for thought for the students reading it and so it was included in the lesson plans.

My curiosity got the best of me. Why did Caitlin McHugh write a paper on the Rohna?? It took me a short while, with the help of Jack Ballo to locate Caitlin, now a lawyer living in Philadelphia. We corresponded through email and even spoke on the phone. Last May Caitlin wrote the following blurb and sent it to me so that I could include it in a Rohna Newsletter. Here it is!!

My interest in the HMT Rohna began very simply as research for a college term paper in a World War II history class when I was a student at Cornell University. I had decided to interview my grandfather, William Dobbs, who served in the Army during WWII, to generate ideas for my paper. It was during the interview that I first learned of the HMT Rohna. My grandfather told me that he departed from Oran, Africa for the China-Burma-India theater by way of the HMT Rajula. Half of his battalion, the 31st Signal Construction Battalion, was aboard the Rajula's sister ship, the HMT Rohna, when it was sunk by a radio guided German missile. I was struck and puzzled by this story. Why hadn't I ever even heard of the Rohna before? After the interview, I began to research the Rohna's fatal journey. The more I read and researched, the more troubled I became. Why was there a gaping hole in the history books for this monumental and tragic event—the greatest loss of American lives at sea during wartime—both at the time and still to this day? I refused to accept the simple explanation that the Rohna's sinking was concealed to protect home front morale. I contacted Michael Walsh and Carlton Jackson, who helped me retrieve documents from the national archives and I interviewed the families of survivors. My goal became not simply to get a good grade on a college paper, but to discover why no one knew about the Rohna sinking and to help the survivors and the families of those men who perished at sea learn the truth. I never imagined having my work published. I now hope my paper serves as a tool to teach students how the HMT Rohna sank, and why so many lives were lost, and why there remained a veil of secrecy for almost 50 years.

Caitlin McHugh is now a part of the extended Rohna family. I hope she will join us at our virtual Rohna Reunion on June 19th.

In Memoriam

Ruth Canney	Reunion Originator, Widow of Survivor John P. Canney	d. 16 Jun 2020
Gus Gikas	Rohna Survivor, Original Board Member	d. 22 Sep 2020

Giving Thanks

Normally we would use this space to remind you that donations are how we keep this organization afloat. However, these times are anything but normal! So, because we are not holding a physical reunion and because at this time our expenses are much less than usual, we would like to take this opportunity to say "Thank you".

Thank you for your unending generosity. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to this organization. Most of all, THANK YOU for always remembering the men of the Rohna!

Articles & Story Submissions

Do you have a story of yourself or your loved one that you would like to share? Please submit your articles, questions, comments or stories to the Interim Editor at: debsan1951@gmail.com.

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HONORING A LEGACY